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Put down that painkiller, pick up a yoga mat: VA study finds yoga helps chronic back pain without pills



San Diego veterans were able to reduce debilitating back pain with twice-a-week yoga and -- in the middle of an overdose crisis -- the number on addictive painkillers dropped from 20% to 8%.



By **Jeanette Steele**

AUGUST 6, 2017, 2:20 PM

In the middle of a prescription painkiller overdose crisis in the United States, a San Diego VA study finds that veterans with chronic pain would be well-served to put down the pills and pick up a yoga mat.

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After six months of twice-a-week yoga sessions, San Diego veterans reported a significant drop in back pain — one of the signature complaints of a demographic that suffers higher rates of chronic pain than the general population.

Also, the number of patients in the study on opiate-based pain pills dropped from 20 percent to 8 percent. It's a potentially important finding, as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs weans its members off of long-term addictive painkillers such as hydrocodone and fentanyl.

One of the study participants was Joe Sturdivant, a 52-year-old retired Marine:

After 22 years in uniform, and miles and miles of patrols carrying heavy packs, Sturdivant's back was a mess.

"In the Marine Corps, you learn to suck stuff up. So I just dealt with it," he said. "I thought it would go away. But I guess it was more severe than I expected."

One day, his back flared up and Sturdivant had to drive himself to the emergency room — unable to even crawl out of his truck once he arrived. Orderlies had to come collect him on a stretcher.

That experience pushed the tough Marine to become open to the yoga study last year.

"I thought yoga was for women," he said. "I always see women with the yoga pants on."

The San Diego study published last month in the American Journal of Preventative Medicine showed that the yoga-mat veterans also reported less fatigue and improved physical functioning.

The connection between yoga and the pill reduction is murky, in part because the San Diego researchers didn't intend to study that factor when they got funding for the study six years ago.

The opiate overdose epidemic in the United States only emerged in the past few years.

Overprescribed: Veterans and the painkiller problem »

Patients in the non-yoga control group also reduced their pill use, leading to the conclusion that people participating in the study were generally motivated to go off painkillers.

However, researchers see some hope because veterans reported a significant drop in pain despite decreased pill use.

Learn more about the quality of care in VA. He hopes his manual for a gentle, stretching focused yoga regime is picked up nationally.

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“Many physicians already believe in yoga and suggest it as one option for their patients. But we need to offer more classes, make it available to more people, and we’re working to do that nationally,” Groessl told The San Diego Union-Tribune.

“It might be available in a psychology clinic, or an inpatient substance-abuse clinic. But that doesn’t mean it’s open to back-pain patients or a broader group of patients,” said the VA researcher, who is also an associate adjunct professor at the University of California San Diego.

Other large studies in the civilian population have shown results with yoga for back pain. But the San Diego VA researchers wanted to see if the same held true for their patients — a largely male, blue-collar group who might be a harder sell for yoga.

“The VA does serve more people who are in need. They have more chronic back pain and more severe back pain, as well as other health problems,” Groessl said. “We wanted to make sure we could recommend this as a treatment for our patients.”

The average age in the study was 53. Nearly one in five reported being homeless in the past five years. The average length of back pain was 15 years.

Sturdivant, who is a VA employee, admits he had some trepidation when he showed up for the first class.

“I didn’t know what to expect. I’m looking around like, these movements, these positions, I don’t have that kind of flexibility,” he said.

“I saw other guys there, so I said, if these guys can do it, I know I can do it. I accepted the challenge because I like challenges.”

The study included 150 San Diego veterans. Half did the yoga program immediately. Their pain ratings were compared to those who hadn’t yet started any yoga.

Groessl, the lead San Diego researcher, said he’d like to next do a longer term study that follows veterans to see if they can keep up the yoga and if it continues to reduce pain.

“Some people stop and get out of the habit,” he said. “We definitely want to study that.”

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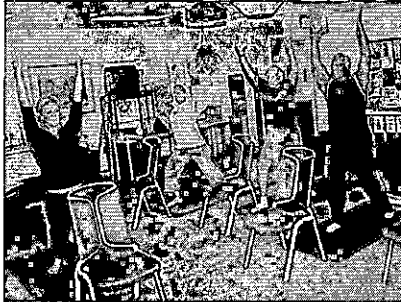
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Veterans stretch and strengthen their core muscles to ease lower-back pain. Left to right: Camilla Sinclair, Lisa Thompkins, Clifford Parver, Robert Carter. Photo courtesy VASDHS.

Lewis Leithner never thought he'd try a yoga class. Push-ups, running, and similar physical training activities were Lewis's style of exercise, having been in the Navy for 31 years.

But when old age crept up and Leithner's chronic back pain set in, he was ready to try anything his doctor recommended to ease his ailing back.

"Before, I'd think of yoga as some old Japanese gentlemen in meditation," Lewis recalls. "It's not like that - it's more like an exercise that teaches you how to breathe, and here I am and I'm enjoying it."

Yoga is often an excellent rehabilitation technique, and various yoga therapy programs have sprung up in VA facilities across the country in response to its effectiveness. Research has shown that yoga helps decrease pain and depression, and improves energy and mental health.

Leithner is taking a yoga class at the VA's San Diego Medical Center that caters specifically to Veterans who suffer from chronic lower-back pain. The class was started in 2003 by Dr. Sunita Baxi, who has conducted extensive research on the topic.

Baxi explains that yoga is a form of therapy that alleviates pain over time. "You cannot expect to get instant gratification from these classes," she said. "This particular class is a form of 'gentle yoga,' which

focuses on postures and the lower back."

After three weeks of yoga, Leithner believes he has seen improvement because, "My wife says I don't complain as much, so I guess it helps."

Robert Carter, who is in the same class as Leithner, is also taking yoga for the first time. He hurt his back in an accident two years ago and his injury had not healed the way his physician had hoped, so he was referred to the yoga therapy class. From that point, he was screened by Dr. Baxi to verify that her specific class was right for him.

Now Carter is reaping the benefits of the holistic treatment. "I'm seeing some results already. My stress level is down, my blood pressure is down, and I've been taking fewer anti-inflammatories with yoga," Carter observed. He is grateful to have improvements to his back problems without undergoing surgery.

"Yoga is not one size fits all."

In Viera, Florida, the VA's Outpatient Clinic has recently started yoga and iRest (integrative restoration) classes as part of its Women Veterans Program. The classes are designed for a mixture of conditions including sleep problems, anxiety, fatigue, chronic pain, military sexual trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Yoga is not one size fits all. We see who is in the class and design a sequence of patterns based on the group," said Emily Hain, a yoga therapist at the Viera clinic.

Many women have participated in both the yoga and iRest classes. iRest is an expansion of yoga and is based on guided relaxation that leads to a form of meditation. "It focuses on finding strengths instead of anxiety or depression," explained Hain.

"We have women looking for coping skills with everyday life, and they are learning skills that impact their quality of life," said Diane Harness-DiGloria, Women's Health Coordinator at the clinic.

Those in the yoga and iRest classes have reported noticeable changes in their well-being. "The women still have pain and stressors, but they can cope better and deal with it," said Harness-DiGloria.

A participant from the last class session was able to wean herself from pain medications, and others noticed improvements in their quality of nightly sleep.

"It was a great experience and a good time to unwind and take time for ourselves," raved Shella Teele, a Veteran participant of the class.

An added benefit of the women-only format was the ability to open up about women's problems, turning the class into an ad hoc support group.

Yoga Programs at VA Facilities

As research progresses, and as Veterans reap the benefits of yoga therapy, the idea of practicing yoga for both men and women of all ages has escalated.

"Yoga is a way to equip people with the tools to help themselves calm down, help them with sleep, and help them with pain," said Hain.

If you are interested in trying yoga for rehabilitative purposes, please consult your doctor to make sure it's right for you.

For more information about yoga and iRest programs at the VA, contact your local VA Medical Center.

Veterans not near a VA facility with a yoga program can receive four free yoga classes through www.yogaforvets.org.

By Stephanie Strauss, VA Staff Writer



Each yoga class at the VA in San Diego has two instructors - one to lead the class, and the other to ensure the positions are properly achieved. Photo courtesy VASDHS.